Sellasia, the last battle of Sparta

Let us place ourselves in the year 254 B.C., Alexander of Macedon died about 70 years ago leaving an enormous empire. He never designed a heir, and when he was close to die and his generals asked him who would heir the empire, it is said that he answered:

"The best one"

The macedonian generals divided the empire among themselves, proclaimed themselves as kings and founded their own dinasties. This time is known as the “hellenistic monarchies”. During a shot period the “diadokoi” (name given to Alexander’s followers) coexisted peacefully, but soon entered in a never ending sucession of wars and short living alliances.

After the gaul invasions fo the beginning fo III B.C. century, Macedon, the core of the old empire, was very weakened, and was unable to efectively control Hellas. Supported by Ptolomeo III from Egipt the poleis (greek city states) were aware that they could not face the Macedonian kingdom individually, so decided to create Leages (or koiines). In these, each city was independent, but there was an assembly whose decisions were followed by all the cities. They were a little less than kingdoms but more than cities.

In the years 290 and 280 B.C. The Etolian Leage (at the north of Corinth Gulf) and the Achaean Leage (at the north of Peloponnesus) were created. The Etolian had a democratic constitution, while the Achaean had a oligarquic one. Both leagues intended to weaken Macedon, and by the time passing alo derived into systems to protect the upper classes power.

Both Leages expanded quickly, but two cities always refused to enter them, Athens and a ruinous Sparta. These two poleis, proud of their glorious past, preferred to keep their total independence. In the year 267 B.C. both cities tried form a Panhellenic Leage to fight against king Antigono II of Macedon but failed, in the year 265 B.C. Sparta was defeated near Corinth and her king Areo was killed in battle. This defeat was a sign of the total decadence of Sparta. On the other side, Athens lost its independence when was sieged and conquered in the year 262 B.C.
The Etolian and Achaean Leages became now the greatest powers of Greece. Aratos of Sicyon was promoted strategos of the Acaean Leage in 245 B.C. Supported by Egypt started a long war to force the Macedons out of Peloponnesus. After many years with victories and defeats Aratos reached his goal, and in the year 231 B.C. the macedons had to leave Peloponnesus.

By that moment the Achaean Leage was the major power of Greece, controlled Atica and the northern half of Peloponnesus. The continuous wars had empowered Greece, the number of slaves multiplies because of continous wars, this brought a very high unemployment, so for many men there was no other sollution than hiring themselves as mercenaries. This state of things provoqued even more wars

In southern Peloponnesus layed the ancient Sparta. After the Peloponnesus War, fought in V century B.C. against Athens, Sparta became the ruler of Greece. Its power was so huge that the spartan king Agesilaos dared even to invade Persia. But in the year 379 B.C. the thebans defeated spartans in the Battle of Leuctra and gained hegemony in Hellas. This was a decisive defeat that Sparta could never recover from. Since then Sparta entered in a long decadence process, but she tried to continue being independent, so first rejected to enter in the Corinth Leage that Alexander the Great promoted, and later said “no” to the Achaean Leage.

After the defeat in hands of macedons and the death in battle of king Areo in the year 265 B.C., it seemed that spartan prestige could not fall lower, but in the year 260 B.C. Aro’s son Akrotatos was defeated and killed while fighting against Megalopolis.

In the year 244 B.C. a young man of only 20 years old bacame king of Sparta, his name was Agis, as the first known spartan king in history, and belonged to the Euripontidae dinasty. At this time Sparta was a mere shadow of what it had been in the past. Continuous wars and economical crisis had reduced the amount os spartiates or “equals” (homoioi) to only 700 men. The 9,000 “kleros” or lots that the demi-legendary Lykurgus had distributed among the spartiates were nowadays in the hands of a few owners, mostly women, who controlled the economy and lived luxuriosuly.

The ancient lykurgean constitution was still valid, theoretically, but in fact almost nobody followed the austere way of live that Lykurgus ordered. The first one not fulfilling these norms was Leonidas II the other king. He was married to a perse woman, was seduced by foreign habits and enjoied the luxury of an oriental royal court.

The spartan education system existed no more, there was no atention paid to the military training, neither to the antique virtues that made the lakedaimonians strong. The austere life was disregarded and the upper classes became extremely codicious and only interested in luxury, pleasure and wealth.

But Agis IV was an idealist, he had been brought up in the old spartan traditions. In fact he was an spartan like those who lived two centuries earlier, and he dreamed with a Sparta resembling the old one. His goal was to revive efectively the likurgean constitution and, and to recover the lost glory for his city.

UIT the support of his mother, who was one of the weathiest persons in Sparta, he began the reforms. First of all he cancelled all the debts, giving example himself and his mother. The upper class was not satisfied, but obeyed. Then proposed to redistribute the land of Sparta, creating 4,500 lots for the citizens and 15,000 lots for the “periokoi”. This was a real social revolution that would mean to raise many degraded Spartans, “periokoi” and liberated hells to the citizenship, and to despoil the dominant oligarchy of his wealth sources.

He also wanted the spartans to be trained as soldiers, and to make them permanently movilized citizen-soldires, as their forerunners were. He wanted to come back to the Sparta of two or three centuries earlier
As he was also interested in expelling the Macedons out of Peloponnesus, he allied with the Achaeaen Leage and battled to throw out them from Argos and Megalopolis. So he has to delay his redistributive reforms.

His absence was well used by king Leonidas II and the oligarchy, both enemies of any reform. When Agis IV came back after the war he was seized and executed by the ephors. It happened in the year 241 B.C.

There was no heir for Agis, and for the first time in many centuries there was only one king in Sparta. Leonidas II forced his son Cleomenes to marry Agiatis, the widow of Agis IV, by this way, thought Leonidas II, his family would heir the wealth of Agis. Surprisingly Agiatis gave her consent to that marriage.

In the year 236 B.C. Leonidas II died and Cleomenes became king and restored de dual-moarchy with his brother Eucleides as second king. Cleomes III was really enloved in Agiatis and she has told him about the dreams and projects of his dead husband. Cleomenes adopted the ideals of Agis IV and promised himself to do the reforms that Agis was not allowed to do, and restore the power and glory of Sparta.

The lykurgean constitution began to gobern spartan life again, the intensive military training, the iron discipline, the nacionalismos and the revived all values, virtues and traditions forged spartans like those who lived long time ago. The communal meals “sissitia”, the black soup and the red cloaks reappeared. For several years Sparta and the spartans were again what they had been in the epoque of Leonidas I, Brasidas, Lysander and Agesilas.

But greek world was no longer as it was two centuries ago. The social revolution in Sparta induced the lower classes in the Achaean Leage that began to claim for analogue reforms. The oligarchies ruling the Achaean Leage noticed with fear the danger that Sparta was now.

On the other hand, Cleomenes reformed among his citizens the nationalism and proud of being spartan feeling. That joined with the need of stopping the expansion of Achaean Leage, and the fear and hate that Cleomenes had caused to threatened upper classes of Achaean Leage could only drive to war.

Tegea and Mantinea allied to Sparta, and in the year 228 B.C. the spartans crushed Arato’s army in the banks of Liceum river. Next year, very close to Leuctra, Cleomenes defeated again the Achaean Leage army.

After these first successes Cleomenes III came back to Sparta, executed the ephors and abolished the ephorate. After that despoiled the minority of owners of their lands, and dividing those terrains in 4.000 lots, distributed them among periokoi and “hypomeiones” (liberated hellots).
Victories came in a row, Mantinea was conquered and in the year 226 B.C. the Achaean Leage suffered a decisive defeat in Hecatombelion. One by one all the cities of Peloponnesus submitted to Sparta, that now had the support of Egypt.

In the year 224 B.C. the Acaean Leage was almost defeated and in a desperate situation. Her strategos, Aratos of Sicyon, gave a 180 degrees turn to his policy and asked for help to his traditional enemy, Antígonus III of Macedon. In payment of his help Aratos promised that Macedon would get the city of Corinth. In this manner Macedon would regain the effective control over the Peloponnesus.

Cleómenes fortified the Istmus of Corinto, and although vastly superior in number the combined armies of Macedon and the Achaean Leage did not dare to attack. Directed by the achaean, the argives rebelled against Sparta, forcing Cleomes to leave the Istmus in order to reconquer Argos. Antigono took advantage of the situation and entered with his army in Peloponnesus. The war lasted two years and no decisive battle was fought till the very end.

In the year 222 B.C. macedon army advanced to invade Lakonian, intending to conquer Sparta herself. Forced to fight, Cleomenes choose to battle in a narrow pass between hills, very close to the aldean village of Selesia. It that position he expected to compensate the numerical superiority of macedonian and achaean armies.

A torrid hot day of July of the year 222 B.C., an army of 10.000 men, spartans and allies, under command of Cleomenes III king of Sparta, took positions in front of the 30.000 men of Antigonus´ army.

Cleómenes commanded directly the spartan phalanx that was placed in the right wing, on the top of Olimpus hill. In the left wing, on the top of Evas hill was his brother and co-king Euclides with the periokoi and allied phalanxs ( these were second class troops ) In the center, palecd the spartan cavalry and some light mercenary troops.

In front of the periokoi phalanx, Antigonus placed illirian and macedon troops under command of Demetrius of Pharos. He formed these troops in manipulum formation, because Evas hill was to accidented to attack in close formation. In the center placed the macedonian cavalry commanded by Alexander. Antigonus himself commanded the macedonian phalanx, placed directly in front of the spartan phalanx, with a screen of light mercenary troops. As the macedon phalanxs was vastly more numerous that the spartan one, it was formed very close and in 32 ranks insteads of the habitual 16 ranks formation. In all the positios Antigonus´ troops outnumbered spartan ones in proportion of two to one or even three to one.
The macedonian right wing started to ascend Evas hill. Seeing that the macedonian cavalry did not move, the mercenaries in Cleomenes’ army center tried to threaten the enemy right wing flank. Then Alexander and his cavalry charged against the spartan cavalry, forcing the mercenaries to retreat in order to support their own cavalry.

In the top of Evas hill, Eucleides did not take advantage of the confusion that the difficult ascension had provoked among Demetrius’ ranks. This hesitation allowed Demetrius to reorganize his troops and charge. The periekoi phalanx was driven out of the top of the hill, from that moment they had to fight up-hill. Outnumbered and in disadvantageous position, the periekoi fought bravely but his formation disintegrated and were annihilated.

On the top of Olimpus hill, light troops of both armies were fighting bravely unable to defeat each other. Then Cleomenes III saw that his brother was being crushed and that his cavalry was almost defeated. Trying to evade from an allmost sure defeat, Cleomenes ordered the spartan phalanx to attack the macedon phalanx in a desperate attempt of stealing the victory from Antigonus’ hands.

The spartans intoned the pean and slowly advanced, ready to win or to die. Both formations crashed violently. One side of the spartan phalanx made the macedons go backwards, but the other macedon flank did the same with the other spartan side, so both formations pivoted. The “homoioi” or “equals” fought so gallantly as they forerunners had always done, but they were vastly outnumbered and the macedonian phalanx was twice deeper than their own phalanx was, so at the end their formation broke. Since then the battle had already a victor.

The fight was still long, horrid and bloody, it lasted the whole day. Ready to “come back with the shield or over the shield” the spartans fought till the last man. So concluded the spartan phalanx last charge, of the 10.000 soldiers of Cleomenes army only 200 survived. Sparta would never fight again.

With a handful of cavalrymen Cleomened went to Sparta, just to order the inhabitants not to try to resist. Then flew to Egypt, where he expected to be helped by Ptolomeo III for raising a new army.

This is how Sparta, the once most powerful polis of Hellas, was occupied for the first time in her history, lost her independence and was forced to join the Achaean League, that from this moment onwards would be under macedon control.

Cleomenes III received no help in Egypt, was put under domiciliary arrest, and suicided in the year 219 B.C. after leading an uprising that failed.

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